

HOME AGAIN

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RIGHT NOW. Pull off your sunglasses and come with me to the Dunes. (To the public it is the Indiana Dunes State Park, but to me it is the Dunes.) Come run barefoot through the warm sand and spring over impatient waves as they break near the shore. Rejoice with me. Cast your arms up and out and salute the sun. Now with arms widespread, spin AROUND to the right, and again to the right, and again and again and AGAIN; and the PULL your way back to the left, to the left, to the left, until the sunglow wild you feel at once everywhere, and you plop down in a heap onto your cushion of sand—the sand of kings. Ulysses. Balboa. Sand that once harbored Viking warships and Phoenician merchant fleets. Sand of earth and sea—now harboring our bodies. We are kings. Together can we feel the spirit of this place. Together. Now.

I was born in the Dunes many years ago on a family camping trip. This is my home. This is where I have laughed and cried, worked and played, shared things and kept secrets. This is where I have conquered all and where all has conquered me. I have grown out of the sand and vine, the wind and wave, the campfire and marshmallows. My home. My own. Home.

The Dunes experience began every summer at 6:00 some Saturday morning with coffeecake and donuts in a lonely looking kitchen. If my brother didn't get into trouble for something, my sister did; and if she didn't, I did, for one of us was bound to spill his (or to be more exact: *her*) coffee or juice and make a nice mess for Mommy to clean up. Of course, sometimes we all managed to commit some fiendish little act, such as losing a shoe or remembering that we packed our toothbrushes last night and we forgot which suitcase they were in. But when the car had been sufficiently loaded with teddy bears, comic books, and numerous pillows, and the journey had officially begun, the mood of all five of us improved. Good-by House. Good-by Yard. Good-by Creek. Good-by Street. Good-by. Good by.

I noted our progress according to the roadmap, so I grew to know the highway well and in time I could announce approaching landmarks without the aid of maps or road signs. The little town of

Tippecanoe always sent shudders through me. The Indians. The soldiers. All so very long ago and all so very real. Perhaps a soldier sat on that rock. Maybe there was once an Indian standing over there. Maybe he was thinking about his home. Maybe they both were. All these things are resurrected in my imagination when I pass through Tippecanoe. And so the day wore on. For lunch we stopped along the road and devoured peanut butter and jelly sandwiches—a feast for royalty. As suppertime neared, the signal appeared. It couldn't have been over four feet tall and it was mostly covered with low grass, but it was there—the first patch of sand which told us that within ten minutes we would be entering the park. After selecting a campsite, setting up the camper, and locating the nearest restroom, we could relax, feeling settled and secure.

The days were filled with beachcombing, swimming and dune-climbing. We built fine castles surrounded by mountains of sand stalagmites. We carved words of glory (i.e. "Hi" and "You're a monkey.") on that narrow strip of sand which lies between where the wavelets seep and the sand powders. How I loved that smooth sand—so firm and cool, like marble. I liked to feel it squish and hear it gush between my toes with each step I took. We used to take long walks along the water's edge. The sand there was grainy and pebbly, and I could feel the ripples rushing in and then slowly creeping back, washing the sand out from under my feet. Sometimes a newly discovered sandbar would interrupt our walks. We would wade out to the bar and for a few minutes we were rulers of our own island kingdom. Kings of the elements. For a few minutes. But there isn't much to do on a sandbar except stand there or sit there; and so we soon lost interest in that game and substituted something more exciting—like swimming. Little by little I would wade out into the icy water, step by step—slowly and deliberately—deeper and deeper, until the piercing sheath cut me off at the shoulders and I couldn't wait any longer and then I slipped purposely under the surface; and when I came up, even the water seemed to shiver about me. If I had remembered to bring an underwater mask, I would have explored the underwater world with a true Lloyd Bridges flair. And when the waves were heavy and high, we would drift along, rising and dipping until the waves swelled like a great wall and rolled us over the mounds of water and carried us like limp fronds of seaweed to the shore. Sometimes the undertow would catch me and pull me under and drag me along the bottom; and I

wasn't sure I would free myself and I wasn't sure my breath would hold out and I wasn't sure . . . But I always came up. The waves taught me fear and pain, but they also taught me a joy nothing can supercede. The waves were kind to me. When we weren't at the beach, we were playing on the dunes which separated the campground from the lake. We would have races up the dunes, down the dunes, across the dunes, everywhere and everyway possible. These dunes weren't just piles of sand, mind you; they were wooded mountains infested with Indian trails. (At least I was convinced they were Indian trails.) Once my sister and I got lost on one of the paths. The funny thing about it was that I wasn't scared. I felt that the Dunes wouldn't hurt me, lost or found.

Night falls early in the park because the sunset is blocked by the dunes and the tree covering. The Dunes is a family place at night. Kerosene lanterns with their steady steely whine. Sitting around the fire on lawnchairs. Wearing look-alike hooded sweatshirts. Smelling of insect repellent. Yes, we were the epitome of the unified family: the family that smells together, dwells together. Maybe my brother and I would catch toads. Maybe we would write post cards to our grandparents and friends. Or maybe we would sit and do nothing. The night was still except for a few crickets, a few crackling fires, and a few shadowy voices murmuring in subdued tones. The timelessness of the place lulled me to sleep. Warm. Contented. In my cradle, endlessly rocking.

There was a special place for me in the park where I went each day. This place was atop the highest dune. As a young girl I only heard of this dune. Then one summer I was old enough to set out on my own and find it. I came upon it by chance as I approached a short valley-like place along the path. There were no markers saying "This is the place" or "the tallest dune in the park," but the number of footprints in the area told me that this was a popular dune and I just had a hunch that this might be the dune I was hunting for. So I climbed. And climbed. And it was. And I was. It was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen; it surpassed the Rocky Mountains, Grand Canyon, and Niagara Falls put together. This was the most beautiful place because I had discovered it alone. Had I discovered Niagara Falls, I probably would have thought that it was the most impressive scene. But nobody TOOK me to the top of this dune. I had found it, and I had the feeling it had found me; we found each other—the dune and I. Partners. I grew tall

on that dune. I looked down upon everything save the trees that were rooted in that sand far longer and deeper than I. A moment of triumph. Looking down upon the little waves, the little beach, the little people, the little everything. Only the trees and sand and I were big. Like O'Neill's Yank I *moved*, I counted, I was life. Once I saw the sunset from that peak. Colors I had seen before seemed to soak right through my skin to my insides; I felt those colors within me. I was life—inside and out. I sang to the wind which gently lapped the face of the dune. I talked to myself and to curious birds that floated overhead. But my voice disturbed no blade of grass; my presence bothered. no leaf or twig. I had been accepted. A part of the dune. I usually ran down the dunes after climbing to the top and admiring the view, but this one was different. Each time I ran down, I felt obligated to climb back up. Therefore, when it came time for me to leave, I walked down with reverence, as if to prolong our oneness.

The family no longer makes our yearly excursion to the Dunes. My brother is married and is in the Philippines with the Navy. My older sister is at Indiana University and is about to be married. I work in the summers now. My younger sister is the only one left who is free to go on vacations; and it seems that every summer the time and liberty for vacations decrease more and more. There seems to be too little time for the Dunes now. Too little time to pick up the cans and candy wrappers left behind by so-called lovers of nature. Too little time to stop the pollution of the lake or to clear the beach of dead and decaying fish. Too little time. But there is still time in my mind for the Dunes, for recorded in the sand is my origin; the Dunes is my birthright. And I know that sometime I will return to the Dunes. I will know when Tippecanoe is five minutes away. I will know when to look for the signal. I will know which path to take and which turns to make. I will know which dune to climb; and when I get there, I will bless it. We will bless each other—the dune and I. My home. My own. Home.